

The Churches and Social Change in Northeast India

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The Northeast is invariably identified in much of India only as a region of conflicts. Undoubtedly the region has many conflicts but their presentation leaves one with the impression that it is the only feature of the Northeast the rest of India knows. The second feature of presentation of the Northeast is to identify the conflicts with the Churches. Such presentations create prejudices, stereotypes and negative attitudes about each other in the minds of the people of the region and of the rest of India. Genuine peace requires a better understanding of the situation and its causes. This paper will try to explore the situation and the role the Churches have played in social change in the Northeast of India.

The Conflicts and the Churches

The RSS ideologue Tarun Vijay wrote in Tehelka (October 9, 2009) “Almost all insurgent movements in the Northeast have overt or covert Church support and the leaders of terrorist organisations in Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura and Meghalaya are invariably Christian.” “There is no conflict in the Northeast in which the church is not involved.” Obviously, he takes the church as one and blames all conflicts on it. Of greater importance is the accusation that the Church is behind the conflicts. What is one to make of this accusation?

Some others attribute the conflicts only to lack of development. That is intrinsic to a victim mentality and the blame game. The state and the militants are united on this. Based on the assumption that lack of development is the main cause, the central government pumps money into the region without any definite plan. That is a recipe for corruption. Another implication of this understanding is that young persons join the militant groups only in order to get a job or for economic reasons. The Central Government negotiates with one of the militant groups, shares some political power with it and rehabilitates its militant cadres with a job. That gives to the youth the message that they will be rehabilitated if they first join the militants and surrender after it. One does not deny that job as a motive exists. For example, a study by the Gauhati University found that around 50 percent of the cadres joined the outfit because they were unemployed. That is part of the vicious circle. An impression is created that unemployment is the major cause of militancy, the cadres are rehabilitated with a job and the unemployed youth see militancy and rehabilitation as a solution to their problem.

Common to all these approaches is over-simplification of the conflicts and their causes. Some call them secessionist and blame them on the church. They then suggest a simplistic solution: treat persons involved in them as terrorists and react to them as to a law and order issue. That can mean tolerating and even supporting violation of human rights.